SHRI JASWANT SINGH: Sir, I would rather not express any comment. I find it somewhat distasteful and demeaning for me to comment on a commercial rating agency. Sir, with your permission, I shall not comment on that.

SHRI B. J. PANDA: Sir, the hon. Minister referred to the 68 billion dollar foreign exchange reserves. It is indeed a comfortable position. The country has come a long way from 1991, when it almost defaulted. My question is, some concerns have been raised that, perhaps, it may become too much of a good thing and it may be reflecting a lower efficiency of fund utilisation in the country. In that, the country may be paying too much, in terms of the deposit rates for NRIs funds. I would like to know the views of the hon. Minister on this.

SHRI JASWANT SINGH: Sir, it is a very difficult question. He is a very able, young hon. Member of the House, and I have high regard for his views. But, Sir. he has sought my views. I cannot have a subjective views in this regard. It can only be the view of the Government. The management of the monetary situation is not an individual effort. The hon. Member is right that a viewpoint is being expressed now that, with a 68 billion dollars foreign exchange reserve and the kind of rate of inflow of money into the country, we have to look at the total question all over again. I can assure the hon. Member that we are seized of the issue. The Reserve Bank of India, under a very able Governorship, is already addressing this question.

Increase in price of natural gas

*389. SHRI BACHANI LEKHRAJ: Will the Minister of PETROLEUM AND NATURAL GAS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government are considering to increase the price of natural gas after 1st April, 2003;

(b) if so, by when and how much and the reasons therefor; and

(c) whether Government of Gujarat have made any representation to the Central Government not to hike gas prices, if so, what decision has been taken?

THE MINISTER OF PETROLEUM AND NATURAL GAS (SHRI RAM NAIK): (a) and (b) As per the Government decision taken in September, 1997 the gas price revision is due.

(c) Yes, Sir. No decision has, however, been taken by the Government on Gas Price Revision.

SHRI BACHANI LEKHRAJ: Sir, I would like to know whether the Government of Gujarat has made any representation, and whether the Department of Petroleum of the Government of India has given any reply to the Government of Gujarat, regarding a hike in gas price.

SHRI RAM NAIK: Sir, the hon. Chief Minister of Gujarat has written a letter on 17th February, 2002 indicating that if the prices of gas are increased, then the prices of power will increase and that Gujarat had suffered two droughts and also an earthquake, so the price should not be increased. I have received similar letters from all the Chief Ministers who are using gas in their States. In order to take the concerns of all into account, the Prime Minister has constituted a Group of Ministers comprising of Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission as the Chairperson, and the Minister of Chemicals and Fertilizers, the Minister of Power, and also myself as Members of that Group. This Group is presently considering as to how to deal with this situation because in 1997 the Government, at that time, had decided that by 1st April, 2002 prices should be revised. That is the situation. We are considering it.

SHRI BACHANI LEKHRAJ: My second supplementary is: What are the reasons for deciding to hike the price of the gas and will it have any adverse affect on the manufacture of electricity and also on other industries?

SHRI RAM NAIK: The reason for the increase, basically, is that we have to bring our prices in the hydrocarbon sector on a par with international prices. So, in 1997, when reforms were considered, the decision had been taken that it should be revised. Since we are facing some difficulties also, we are presently applying our mind and we will take into consideration all these problems.

SHRI C. RAMACHANDRAIAH: Sir, 70 per cent of the indigenous production is being utilised for fertilisers and power generation and most of the consumers are State Electricity Boards. The Government's proposal to increase the prices will totally affect the farmers in this country. Is the Government planning to increase this price taking into consideration the deemed import price? If such is the case, can the Government ensure that it will not affect the farmers in this country?

SHRI RAM NAIK: This group will consider all these issues because finally all the sectors will be affected whether it is power or fertiliser or even agriculturists. We will take that into consideration. As and when the price increases in the international level, we have to be on par with that.

श्रीमती सविता शारदा: सभापति महोदय, मैं आप के माध्यम से माननीय मंत्री जी को बताना चाहती हूं कि इन दिनों सूरत में गैस के भाव बहुत बढ़ गए हैं। महोदय, सूरत शहर जहां अधिकतर कपड़ा उद्योग में लोग काम करते हैं, वहां एक तो बिजली नहीं मिल रही है और दूसरे गैस भी इतनी मंहगी होती जा रही है कि आम जनता पर भी उस का बुरा असर पड़ रहा है। इतना सब होने के बावजूद वहां की गैस कंपनीज लोगों से बात करने को भी तैयार नहीं है। पिछले एक महीने से वहां के लोगों ने स्ट्राइक भी की, लेकिन कंपनी वाले उनके साथ कोई बात करने को भी तैयार नहीं थे। इसलिए मैं माननीय मंत्री महोदय से पूछना चाहूंगी कि क्या आप बीच-बचाव करके कोई ऐसा रास्ता निकालेंगे कि लोगों को गैस कम भाव पर मिले?

श्री राम नाईक: सभापति जी, ये कंपनियां निजी क्षेत्र में है और अगर वहां के लोगों की कठिनाई हमें बताई जाएगी तो मैं निश्चित तौर पर उस को सुलझाने के लिए कोशिश करूंगा।

*390. *[The questioner (Shri Gaya Singh) was absent. For answer vide page 32].*

*391. *[The questioner (Shri S. Agniray) was absent. For answer vide page 33].*

*392. *[The questioner (Dr. Dasari Narayana Rao) was absent. For answer vide page 33—36].*

Development of Reghurajpur village in Puri, Orissa

*393. SHRI KRIPAL PARMAR:†
SHRI B.J. PANDA:

Will the Minister of TOURISM AND CULTURE be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have identified Reghurajpur village in Puri district of Orissa as one of the 10 places for development of tourist centres; if so, what are the other such places in Orissa;

†The question was actually asked on the floor of the House by SHRI KRIPAL PARMAR.